DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 067 714 CS 500 020

AUTHOR Cowell, Catherine R.
TITLE Communication--Problem or Mystery?: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 15p.; Speech given at the Convention of the Southern States Speech Communication Assn. (San Antonio, Texas, April, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Existentialism; Humanities; Inner Speech (Subvocal); Interpersonal Relationship; *Linguistic Theory; *Personal Relationship; *Philosophy; Research Methodology; Symbolic Language
IDENTIFIERS *Marcel (Gabriel)

ABSTRACT

One of the central issues in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel is the distinction between "problem" and "mystery." The author claims that speech communication scholars find it necessary to objectify elements of communication in the framework of a problem in order to find answers in the form of systematic theories to explain the phenomenon in question. Marcel, however, treats communication as subjective, which classifies it as a mystery and, therefore, not open to objective methods of investigation. The author explains Marcel's analysis of communication as a facet of man's participation in existence. She concludes with the question as to whether the communications scholar inquires out of curiosity about a problem or, in fact, out of wonder about a mystery. (RN)

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Communication--Problem or Mystery?: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel

by

Catherine R. Cowell
Assistant Professor of Speech
Department of Fine Arts
Angelo State University
San Angelo, Texas 76901

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CS 500 020

3500 words

Communication--Problem or Mystery?: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel

Summary: One of the central issues in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel is the distinction he makes between the terms "problem" and "mystery." For the speech communication scholar, it is necessary to objectify the elements of communication in the framework of a problem, as he attempts to find answers in the form of systematic theories to explain the phenomenon in question. For Marcel, however, it appears that the nature of communication is essentially subjective, which places it in the realm of mystery, and therefore out of the reach of objective methods of investigation.

In his explication of the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, Kenneth Gallagher states: "A system is a spectacle which is there for a disengaged mind, a mind which is not itself enclosed within the panorama it beholds. For the human subject such a disengagement is unthinkable."[1]

On this view, the speech scholar engaged in the study of communication theories and systems is engaged either in attempting to think the unthinkable, or to make himself non-human. The disengagement of mind necessary to the description of communication systems and theories is, however, a widely-well-thought-of device for the understanding of communication behavior. We aim at security in thought. We seek a consistent system of propositions, whether the method be deductive or inductive. We search out logical or empirical

parameters and fill in their interstices with observable components, in exercises of objectivity. If the nature of our research were of a sort properly to be thus objectified, the approach would be above criticism. If, however, communication is non-objectifiable, then the search for system is inappropriate.

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

Hugh Dalziel Duncan in a recent statement protests the mechanistic orientation of sociology toward the study of human communication. His concern is with the function of symbolic interaction, primarily as the activity of "naming." This orientation, he states, has been subjected to mechanistic distortion. What he protests of sociology may be applied as well to communication theory when he writes: "American sociologists who think of communication as a 'map,' a 'pattern,' or a 'net,' seem to do so under the illusion that the use of mechanical models will remove symbols from 'expression,' which is subjective, to some realm of 'process,' which is objective."[2] Duncan's alternative to the mechanistic model is the dramatistic model of Kenneth Burke. While this may be an improvement, in that it treats of communication as a social, not a physical, event, yet it does not do away with the rejection of subjectivity to which Gallagher objected at the beginning of the present paper. The disengagement of mind from an event with which it is necessarily engaged--as pertains in all forms of communication--results in a distortion, rather than an explanation, of the phenomenon under study. If it is Duncan's thesis that

symbolic communication relies for its effectiveness of the public, rather than the private, nature of the symbols employed, he, too, has rejected subjective experience as unreliable in contrast with the reliability of objective experience; and his system, too, would be viewed by Marcel as "unthinkable." When Duncan states that for the study of communication in society, "We must be careful to ground our methodology in some coherent body of theory,"[3] he treats communication as a "problem." For Marcel it is a "mystery."

PROBLEM AND MYSTERY

Marcel describes four major distinctions between problem and mystery. These distinctions hinge on what he means by an "object." In the context of the problem, the object is viewed as something external to the observer, something encountered as outside and over against the self. Gallagher explains, "A problem . . . is an inquiry which is set on foot in respect to an object which the self apprehends in an exterior way."[4] In a mystery, however, what is given cannot be detached from the self. Being non-externalizable, the mysterious is indefinable. "A mystery is a question in which I am caught up."[5] To question communication is to question oneself as communicator; no object may be viewed without consideration of the observer's subjective involvement with it.

First, then, according to Marcel, a "problem" is objectifiable--always with recognition of the necessary distortion which results--; a mystery is not. Secondly the problem

admits of a solution, has a result; a period may eventually be put to the inquiry. By contrast, the mystery is insoluble--not merely a problem for which the solution has not yet been found. The question continually renews itself; there is never a stage reached when further thought is not always necessary. Thirdly, the objectifiable nature of the problem makes the experience of it interchangeable among its viewers; this makes verifiability possible. On the other hand, the subjective data of mystery involve the necessity of unverifiability as between viewing or experiencing subjects. There is no concensus of experience of the data; therefore, no objectively valid judgment is possible. Lastly, there is a dramatic difference in the mode in which the question is asked. Problems are approached in the tenor of curiosity; the goal is the addition of knowledge to one's store of experience. Questions pertaining to mystery, however, are asked in a mood of wonder, according to Marcel, even of astonishment--as of the delight of the child tasting a new fruit--even sometimes of joy. There may be wonderment even in mysteries involving feelings of failure, gloom and despair.[6]

The concept of mystery as developed by Marcel is central to his philosophy because it leads directly to the need for "secondary reflection," that mode of thought which, having met the mystery, turns in upon itself and examines the concrete immediacy of experience. The activity of secondary reflection is not an irrational or non-rational mode of

experience. It is rather a suprarational activity of thought. Marcel states: "I am not a spectator who is looking for a world of structures susceptible of being viewed clearly and distinctly, but rather . . . I listen to the voices and appeals comprising that symphony of Being--which is, for me, in the final analysis, a supra-rational unity beyond images, words, and concepts."[7]

For Marcel, consideration of even the most abstract, outwardly problematic data arises from and finally resolves into consideration of the non-systematic realm of the self, of feeling, and of being. Problem-solving and the construction of systems and models may be a first step toward knowledge. But the final step requires a supra-rational, inward reflection which is ultimately non-systematizable and incommunicable.

It appears, then, impossible or at least inappropriate to derive a theory of communication from the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. Gallagher states that Marcel himself early recognized that it was futile to set out his philosophy of personal existence in "a system of transmittable theorems, over which the mind feels a comfortable mastery," because "what it would entail is the installation of the mind in the vantage point of the absolute observer, one who had the best possible seat from which to view the totality of the real. In effect, this means a de-personalized observer, a nobody-in-particular, for every personal point of view is

the opposite of absolute: it is mine. Personal experience--my experience in a smuch as it is mine--could therefore never be integrated into such a system."[8]

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARCEL

Because, however, we in speech communication are curious, wish to add to our store of external knowledge some verifiable constructs, and keep trying to put a period to the inquiry--are in short, problem-solvers by inclination--, I will attempt to objectify and define some of the elements of Marcel's philosophy.

There appears to be no hierarchy of components within the system. The concepts to be briefly developed here may be viewed as an interpenetrating matrix, a system of many dimensions. These divide into three major groups, which I shall term "worlds," "stages," and "modes."

Marcel makes a distinction between "being" and "having" and calls them "worlds." There is a pivotal difference between what one is and what one has. To "have" is to have the power to give or reveal oneself to another, or to keep to oneself. This is the basic subject-object relation. According to H. J. Blackham, Marcel holds that "Possession of an exterior object involves the 'I' in anxieties. Even where there is lack of possession, mere desire is a form of having, and this desire to enjoy possession corresponds to the anxiety about losing what is possessed."[9]

In the realm of ideas, the tension between the worlds of being and having is acute, and the "I" must be wary of whether he has the notion or is had by it. Marcel holds

that this is least true when the person works creatively with what he "has." The genuine thinker remains creative because his thought is always being put in question and put to the test. Both he and his ideas are alive and assimilated to each other in the mode of mystery.[10]

Thus there appears to emerge a mid-region between these two worlds: the place of "existence." Out of the tension between the self and the world there arises, as Blackham interprets Marcel, "a region in which the self opens itself to the world and unfolds and is transcended in a participation which is its subjective reality. The body is the kernel or the symbol of this middle region when we do not treat it as an independent reality closed upon itself, but rather as an outcrop of a submerged kingdom whose main extent lies below the surface of the water."[11]

This "metaphysical Atlantis," as Blackham calls it, is the truly inexplorable part of the worlds where we exist; yet for Marcel it is the region of all that is most deeply valuable in our experience. It is impossible even provisionally to explicate and objectify this region; yet it is at the geographical center of the mystery of communication.

The second dimension of the communication matrix concerns what I have termed "stages." As labelled by Gallagher, these stages, or phases in the process of being, are three: Community, Communication, and Communion. Each involves different degrees and styles of participation in existence, and in the worlds of being and having. There is the purely

incarnate, sensuous level; the social level; and the dyadic, or intersubjective level. In each of these, as Gallagher puts it, "To be living is to be open to a reality with which I enter into some sort of commerce. . . . 'Esse est co-esse' [to be is to be with] is true not only on the plane of sensible existence but above all on the plane of personal being. . . . The tie which binds me to others gives me to myself."[12]

The stage of Community is that of the original unity experienced by the infant with its environment. The presence of others is an unquestioned, integral part of existence. It does not occur to the infant to question this pervasive presence of others, nor to take a position of acceptance or rejection toward it; it is simply there, part of the environment.

From this stage, the individual progresses in the normal course of things to the level of Communication. At this level, the primarily verbal modes--the public system of symbols of which Duncan writes--come into operation. Language as such is primarily dependent on objectification, according to the theories of Duncan and many others. The interchangeability of symbols in a way which makes them meaningful to many places the use of language in the realm of the problem. As language isolates and manipulates meaning, it may also isolate and manipulate its users--those who "have" it. The paradox of language is that while the goal of its acquisition is to permit the fullest exchange of meaning, it is itself the outgrowth of the isolation of the individual.

This separation of self from the community results in growing awareness of others as separate selves. One makes of oneself--and of others--an object, a thing. Here is the realm in which communication as it is generally viewed is most necessary and most accessible to observation. As Burke might put it, separation is necessary to the system.[13] Without it, the communicative situation would not arise. The awareness of our own and the other's subjectivity requires the establishment and continued maintenance of a common world of shared meanings, so that social cooperation may occur. The stage of Communication is, then, basically self-centered. From the unconscious co-esse of Community, one passes into a conscious state of coexisting as a self with others: to a simultaneity of community and division which necessitates Communication. Thus the rational use of public symbols, best observed in the use of language, is fundamentally egocentric, arising out of a private world, despite its goal of a common world.

The stage of Communion is reached only as one transcends what Gallagher terms "the egocentric enticements of communication" and opens the self to a "thou" in a "truly personal encounter."[14] The significance of the term "thou" in existential literature, as in Marcel (who disavows existentialism) is its status as a pronoun in the second, rather than the third, person. Only a "he"--a "thing"--can be characterized in terms of his predicates, that is, objectified. In the stage of Communion, the other is non-objectifiable: he is a mystery. Gallagher writes: "The thou which is given

to me in an encounter is not a mere repertory for facts; furthermore, he himself is not the subject of a factual description. The reality of the thou cannot be grasped by a series of predicates."[15] According to Marcel, when "Who are you?" is asked of the thou in the spirit of Communion, it is not a request for information; it is a form of the appeal, "Be with me." In Marcel's words, "the path leading from dialectic to love has now been opened."[16]

For Marcel, the experience of Communion--for which his term is "encounter"--is constitutive of the self. To remain in an ego-centered mode of existence is to be only partially alive, is to refuse authenticity. He writes: "All authentic sin will be closing oneself to this universal openness by shutting oneself off from others to take one's own self as center."[17]

The efficient cause of Communion is its mode; and for this mode of openness to the other, Marcel uses the term "disponibilité." According to Gerber, this word connotes welcoming, surrender, abandonment, and allied attitudes which are opposed to the attitude of "crispation" (lit., "turning or curling inward").[18] Blackham further describes this attitude, difficult to translate, as follows: "The theory of the second person (the thou), the presence of two persons to each other . . . implies the notion of disposability. . . the readiness to bestow and spend oneself and make oneself available, and its contrary, indisposability. To be indisposable is to be self-absorbed, that is, to be

fixed in the realm of having. But I exist in the first place because I can dispose of what I have, sacrifice it. . . . In such acts I am not only fully present, I go beyond myself, I respond . . . I am <u>disponible</u>, hospitable."[19]

The indisponible man, by contrast, is characterized by his egoism, and by the "inability to admire."[20] Blackham's words are vivid in regard to what he terms "indisposability;" it is, he says, "to be restless, gloomy, and anxious by condition, to be possessed by a vague unquiet which in relation to particular objects on which interest fixes hardens into despair, for I tend to identify myself with what I have and to reflect that when I no longer have anything I shall no longer be anything."[21]

CONCLUSION

My examination of the concepts of Gabriel Marcel has barely touched the surface of his philosophy. At first I was tempted to treat superficially some of these concepts, to make easy translations of such terms as "encounter," "openness," and even "existence," as they have been loosely and analogically used in some theories of communication. I soon learned that this approach is in error. The more I read of Marcel, the more I was aware of an inner resistance to the idea of trying to view his philosophy of interpersonal relations in terms of "system." His treatment of the distinction between problem and mystery settled for me the inappropriateness of such a method. Yet I was aware also of my own ingrained need for system. The attempts of Duncan

and Burke to ground a theory of symbolic interaction in the public symbols with which we normally communicate had begun to meet this need in a way which the mechanistic models of communication had never done for me. Yet Marcel made even these seem superficial modes of "problem-solving;" and it seems what we have here is a mystery. Pursued to its limits, there is no way to objectify the essence of the self-other relation in communication.

According to Marcel, the nexus of this series of acts we commonly call communication is located in "the act by which I expose myself to the other person instead of protecting myself from him, which makes him penetrable for me at the same time as I become penetrable for him."[22] But the act itself is necessarily obscure. Marcel writes: "Yourself, himself. . . . Where does a personality begin? What is revealed. . . is that there is a region of fructifying obscurity transcending the closed systems in which thought imprisons us, where beings may communicate, where they <u>are</u> in and by the very act of communication."[23]

Will we ask our questions, then, out of curiosity about the problem, or of wonder about the mystery? Attempts to theorize beyond the pragmatic needs of problem-solving are, on this view, an attempt to "think the unthinkable," and may cause us to lose our humanity. One must proceed with caution, aware of the risks involved. The systems we reify in theory may come to be the ideas which "have" us, rather than the materials from which we may further create our being and experience our existence.

[Footnotes]

Catherine R. Cowell (Ph.D., University of Denver, 1971) is Assistant Professor of Speech at Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

[1]*The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York, 1962), p. 13.

[2]*Symbols in Society* (New York, 1968), p. 5.

[3]Duncan, p. 16.

[4]Gallagher, p. 31.

[5]Gallagher, p. 32.

[6]The foregoing paragraph abstracted from Gallagher, pp. 31-40.

[7]*The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 82-83.

[8]Gallagher, p. 13.

[9]*Six Existentialist Thinkers* (New York, 1959), p. 71.

[10]See Blackham, pp. 71-72.

[11]Blackham, p. 72.

[12]Gallagher, p. 22.

[13]See William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis, 1963), *passim*.

[14]Gallagher, p. 23.

[15]Gallagher, p. 25.

[16]*Creative Fidelity* (New York, 1964), p. 33.

[17]See Rudolph Gerber, "Marcel and the Being of the 'Other'," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, VI (Fall, 1966), 86.

[18]Gerber, p. 188.

[19]Blackham, pp. 80-81.

[20]Gallagher, p. 26.

[21]Blackham, p. 80.

[22]Creative Fidelity, p. 36.

[23]Creative Fidelity, p. 35.